

# Community College Students, Accelerated Learning, and the Small Moments

*By Linda Holman*

Teaching basic reading, writing, and critical thinking skills is immensely gratifying and vitally important work, requiring intelligence, optimism, and humanity. To be able to gain some sliver of understanding with regard to students' attitudes, behaviors, skills, and abilities; to recognize that there exists a multiplicity of possible explanations for anything; and to see students as complicated, capable individuals, not as subjects or statistics, is essential. However, student success—especially in remedial courses—is tenuous. Students in these courses represent a wide range of ages, educational backgrounds, cultures, and abilities, and these disparities may cause students to question their own identity and/or ability. Often, when students see themselves as misplaced, their motivation is diminished by feelings of distrust, frustration, and anger. Making matters worse, many students have unimaginably burdensome life, home, travel, work, and school responsibilities, and while some instructors eventually learn about important aspects of their students' personal lives, that knowledge is usually too late and too limited to change the student's situation.

Despite these challenges, most of our students are highly motivated, hardworking individuals, and their instructors are often extraordinary teachers. Nevertheless, too many remedial students become lost to us, and

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it has long been clear to me that the importance of matters such as class size and culture cannot be ignored. As an English teacher involved with remedial students, I believe they need more consideration, and my colleagues need more space and time, to be able to respond to their students as human beings. The Kingsborough Community College Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) is one response to the needs of remedial students and has enjoyed initial success, providing a compelling option to help our students succeed.

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#### CLASSROOM REALITIES AND ALP SUCCESS

The remedial course I teach is for students who have not passed the CUNY Assessment Test in Writing (CATW) and is designed to prepare them for English 12 (or Freshman English I), one of two required English courses at Kingsborough. At most, the class

has 25 students, but common issues such as class absences, tardiness, or missing assignments may be irreparable by the time I grasp what assistance or support may be needed. Knowing about students' homework habits, study skills, access to or knowledge of technology is crucial to teaching students, especially community college students who often have uncommon educational histories.

The Kingsborough Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) is a relatively new program but one that has garnered positive student responses. The impetus for the program came in September 2009, at the English Department's annual faculty retreat, where ALP's originator, Peter Adams, was invited to speak with us.<sup>1</sup> As he described the program's history, he compared it with our learning communities (paired courses, in various disciplines, that require student co-registration as well as some degree of faculty co-instruction), which had existed for at least a decade at Kingsborough, and he outlined the similarities: learning communities are capped at a lower number than their non-learning community coun-

terparts, so the classes are relatively small; the students choose to participate, which detracts from the negativity which surrounds remediation; and the instructors of the paired courses communicate regularly to discuss their courses—the success of specific readings, materials, assignments, and tests—as well as the relationship between the two courses, which increases teaching effectiveness in both courses.

Although ALP is taken concurrently with a nonremedial course, it is a remedial course. The way it works is a select number of students who have not yet passed the CUNY Assessment Test in Writing (CATW) are recommended to register for both ALP and English 12, without having to take the remedial course that typically would precede English 12. Upon successful completion of the course, they may move to the second required English course (English 24). While the English department's ALP course is evolving, so far it has provided a rich, rewarding experience for instructors and students.

Capped at a mere 10 students, compared to 27 in an English 12 class, ALP is taught by the same instructor who also is teaching the student in English 12. Initially, ALP was a non-credit one-hour course that did not appear on CUNY's computerized information system, but it has become a one-credit one-hour course, listed with the same section number as English 12. Meanwhile, the CATW, which initially was given in the sixth week of the course, now is first administered around the eighth week, and again at end of the semester for students who have not yet passed it. While CATW is not the focus of the ALP, and individual teachers create teaching materials, ideas, and strategies, most instructors provide test preparation. As the semester progresses, instructors' questions or issues may be discussed with the ALP director, or exchanged with colleagues at a mid-semester meeting. New instructors also attend an end-of-semester meeting. The program's standards are these: (1) students must sign a con-

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tract stating the program's requirements, (2) students may not miss more than two classes, and (3) excessive absences in either class results in a penalty grade for both classes. Students who violate the rules may not receive permission to take the CATW, and may have to register for the bypassed remedial course or retake English 12, depending upon their CATW score.

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#### ALP'S BEAUTY

Despite the program's newness, the idea of ALP immediately appealed to me. At the first pre-semester ALP meeting, which consisted of a faculty presentation, a question and answer session, and a brainstorming activity, we learned that ALP course planning belonged solely to instructors. At mid-semester, even though I was unsure I had provided enough test preparation, the students' CATW scores,

as well as their research essays, final grades, and responses, were positive. Since then, I have taught the course the same way each semester, making only minor modifications. Because the ALP class meets for only one hour a week, ALP success hinges greatly on English 12, which meets twice a week. Each two-hour English class is arranged around one core text (e.g., *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, *The Smartest Kids in the World*) as well as other related essays and articles, especially recent articles from *The New York Times*, and short stories, poems, images, films or videos, or other resources. ALP work is related to English 12 work, and ALP students engage in individual and small group activities, with weekly in-class writing assignments, plus three essays. Drafts of the first two essays are written in the classroom, as is a prospectus and various portions of the third essay, which is a research essay requiring independent research as well as MLA documentation. In theory, ALP instruction should supplement English 12 instruction. In

practice, because ALP instruction is limited to 12 hours, or less, depending on student attendance or circumstances, the success of the ALP course depends heavily upon the work in English 12.

My ALP class begins with an ice-breaking exercise, a writing sample, and review of a concept discussed in the first English 12 class (e.g., annotation). Throughout the course, I review concepts from English 12. Often the lessons may have been too quickly paced, or students may need more time to comprehend an idea or to practice a writing strategy, which may lead me to re-teach some part of a lesson. Generally, I spend three sessions on CATW preparation. In the first, we review the format of the test, as well as the grading rubric, and read a CATW sample essay. In the second, students write practice essays, and whenever possible, I write a practice essay, too. In the last, students score each other's essays and listen to the practice essays read aloud. Before reading, I make copies, so that the students have my scores as well as their peers' scores, and we talk about the quality of the writing and our scoring. After the first CATW, we begin discussing research topics and research questions, and then later, we gauge the clarity, creativity, and correctness of tentative thesis statements. One semester, to jumpstart the search for sources, the class had a library workshop. A reference librarian talked with the students about their research projects and made suggestions regarding sources and search strategies. During the hour, students located sources, took notes, emailed information, and photocopied materials, and the following day, in English 12, the ALP students had agency—they were so confident because of their advance preparation.

Preparation is crucial to the success of the English 12 research essay—the project is presented incrementally, and the work comes together beautifully when students maintain the pace of the small assignments. For example, the English 12 assignment requires students to participate in at

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least two peer reviews, but students sometimes are reluctant to participate; ALP students however, who usually have an additional peer review, are typically willing and appreciative of opportunities to give or receive feedback. Furthermore, ALP students tend to communicate with each other outside of class and even arrange for peer review outside of the classroom. They tend to become a socially cohesive group—they sit close to each other, and opt to work together, not only in the small ALP classroom, but

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also in their much larger English 12 classroom. ALP students appear to be happier and more motivated than their peers, and usually are more receptive to teachers.

In my class, I regularly ask for student input on our topics and our focus. More frequently than their peers, ALP students ask questions, send e-mails, make casual conversation, and visit my office. And, because of the small class size, ALP students may submit late work at

the ALP session without penalty. In English 12, ALP students are anonymous, so ALP may feel inclusive (or exclusive) rather than remedial. And, in ALP, whole class participation is expected—no matter whether it is writing a thesis statement on the board or reading an introduction aloud. In English 12, due to the class size, student participation is rarely ever full student participation. For ALP students, at least some of the barriers to active learning are eliminated.

Unfortunately, not all ALP students are successful. Some students request admittance to the program for poor reasons—the belief that passing the CATW requires formulaic calculations or cheating, or that serious reading, thinking, and writing can be avoided. Others have insurmountable past or current issues. But mostly, students who demonstrate the desire, through their words, actions, or writing, to commit to an additional hour of instruction tend to be successful. Those with negative attitudes or behaviors are destructive to themselves and to the class: students who pass the class with a minimal amount of effort, who are routinely late, who

attend the minimum number of classes to be able to take the CATW, or who habitually plagiarize or cheat, sap time, energy, and enthusiasm from the other students as well as the instructor—just like their counterparts in English 12.

Fortunately, the majority of ALP students swim in sync—they commit to the course, and most tend to succeed in both classes. The most successful ALP classes are the ones in which the students bond together, providing information and emotional support for each other. Sometimes though, a remedial student who appears to be unmotivated or unteachable may just need additional time, and their issues (e.g., finances, self-confidence, home crisis, culture and identity) to be managed.<sup>2</sup>

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#### A BUZZING BUG

One semester, on the first day of class, an ALP student objected to policies on attendance, test prep, and writing, and I wondered whether I had adequately addressed her questions. I also wondered if I had done something to cause her resistance to the course. Due to the semester's calendar configuration and the room assignment, several students were late or absent, contributing to some confusion, and later, I could not recall this student's name. However, a week later, one student had been absent from two English 12 classes, so I cross-checked the lists and connected the dots.

I still remember that day—the first day of English 12. Class had just begun. Someone screamed, several students sprang out of their desks, while others swatted at a black, buzzing bug that had flown through an open window. After the bug settled on the floor, I pushed a sheet of paper beneath it and forcefully waved the paper through the window. A student shouted at me: “Why didn’t you just kill it?” And even though I cannot provide a transcript of the conversation, I know I used the word karma to explain my belief that our actions, good and bad, come back to us, in one

form or another, and I didn't want to harm the bug—I just wanted to remove it from the classroom. In fact, I hoped it would live. This explanation led to a brief, lively class discussion, which included questions on the concept of *karma*, and students shared their thoughts and opinions about death and justice. One posed a hypothetical question to me: “Suppose someone threw you out a window: How do you think you would feel?” I proposed the possibility that I might survive the fall, which

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led to laughter and a few funny remarks. Because of this small moment, for the remainder of the semester the students determined me to be an optimist. It was the second week of classes before I realized the missing ALP student was the person who had screamed at me to kill the bug. I don't know if she stopped coming to class because she was embarrassed or uncomfortable about what others, or me, in particular, may have

thought of her behavior on that first day of class. Although there may have been other reasons for her absence, I blame myself for the fact that she stopped attending.

#### THE SMALL MOMENTS

In contrast to this experience, over the years, I have had the opportunity to connect with a stream of ALP students, and to see the importance of the small moments. One of the aspects of the experience that seems insignificant, but is not, is the relationship between students and instructor. Mentorship is a component of the program's success—students benefit significantly when they form relationships with their instructors and their peers. I had one student who visited my office to de-stress, before and after taking the CATW. I had another who sought advice before every ALP session, before finally withdrawing from one of his courses. Before that withdrawal, he told me he might not be suited for college because he was struggling with all of his classes; after withdrawing from



that course, he had a great semester. Another student seemed unmotivated, but I knew she was working long hours after long days at the college. One day, she mentioned she was hungry, and I offered her my emergency snack before that class, and then before every class that followed it. She always accepted the energy bar, but we never spoke personally to one another until the end of the semester. Her research essay was exceptional, and her CATW score was the highest of all my ALP students, but she apologized for not earning a higher score and said she wanted me to feel proud of my instruction. These are just a few examples. ALP students continue to contact me, long after our class together has ended, and long after they have graduated. And mentorship is not always teacher to student—it may be student to student. One semester, two students provided support for each other in the classroom and at the testing site—one was coping with a disability, and the other with a new language and culture. Both students passed the CATW with excellent scores, and co-registered for the same section of the second course in the sequence.

Still, every semester, despite my overwhelmingly positive experiences teaching this course, I read my new students' first-day writing samples and struggle to imagine them passing the CATW; again and again, my students amaze me. Last semester, one of my remedial students became an ALP student—against my advice. Even though she had been successful in English 92, she did not pass the CATW; she had college, family, and work responsibilities, so I advised her not to register for ALP, but rather to take the advanced remedial course, to give herself more time to learn English. Despite my recommendation, she insisted on registering for ALP with me, and she passed the CATW, and succeeded brilliantly. Because of all the amazing students who I have worked with in the ALP program, I have come to realize that the catalyst for college success is

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often found in the small moments. Strangely, I had learned long ago how important the small moments can be, but I guess I needed to be reminded by my students.

I had an unimaginably bad student teaching experience. But my student teaching peers, with whom I met weekly, and an art teacher in a nearby middle school made it bearable. Without them, I am not sure I would have completed my senior year of college. The support of others

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gave me the strength to endure, and I learned so much about myself, the students, and the world that semester. James Baldwin, one of the 20th century's greatest writers, held the optimistic belief that human beings cannot be solely defined by their relationship to the world because he, and so many others, have had the capability to far exceed its boundaries: "I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me, certainly, but I am also, much

more than that. So are we all."<sup>3</sup>

The high school where I student taught was, in every way, a neglected, poor one, and it was such a long distance away from the university. The students, though, were compelling and complicated, and I knew I wanted to be a teacher, but my assigned teacher mentor was disillusioning, and my appeals to the university and my supervisor were useless. One rainy evening, our supervisor was absent, and the student teachers held a seminar without a supervisor. That conversation about our student teaching experiences changed everything for me—I gained knowledge from discovering the disparities in our experiences, and I gained strength from their surety that I had to change the conditions of my student teaching placement. Unfortunately, I could not change the fact that I had silently observed our teacher mentor's placement of the prettiest girls in the front of the room, and I could not change the fact that he had he had attached our desks, but I demanded the end of his sexual remarks and casual touching. I had already been informed that a satisfactory evaluation required my

silence, and an unsatisfactory one would remain with me for years. According to the university, I had no other recourse than to withdraw from my student teaching placement. Another semester of college would have been difficult, financially and emotionally, but I am forever grateful to the students in my seminar who were adamant that I should speak up, regardless of the consequence. Afterward, no longer worried or afraid, I enjoyed all of my days at the high school, but I saw the American school system from a new perspective. On most days, with my teacher mentor away coaching his team, the classroom was a peaceful, productive place, but there was no teacher training. At the end of the day, I walked to a nearby middle school and helped an art teacher clean up and organize her classroom. The interaction, to anyone who had observed it, would have seemed insignificant: We talked about teaching and life, and then she gave me a lift back to the dorms, but because of her mentorship I rose above my circumstances.

Many students need to encounter someone or something that allows them to move beyond their circumstances, to believe in themselves, and to strive for something that may seem unattainable or unbelievable. Today, almost 40 years after my college and student-teaching experiences, far too many students still exist on the margins of our society, and their college success is uncertain. At Kingsborough, though, ALP allows a small number of them to land in a soft place, and to build their resilience. And, because of the small moments, their lives are so much more than whatever seemed imaginable—and the effects will last far beyond remediation.



## END NOTES

- 1 Adams, et al., “The Accelerated Learning Program: Throwing Open the Gates.” pp. 50-69.
- 2 For students with limited English language skills, the test typically is passed after taking an intervention course.
- 3 Baldwin, *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, p. 810.

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